NEWS

Franchisee has flair for publicity

by Louise Kramer

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — McDonald's Corp. has gained its prominence in the global fast-food industry by standardizing practices and working to make sure the operators of its 18,380 restaurants stick to all the rules.

However, that doesn't mean there isn't room for creativity, even in these days of stiff competition among the major burger chains.

Max Cooper, a McDonald's franchisee based here, has brought a creative mind and a flair for marketing and promotion to the burger chain for 39 years. An affable man with a ready, yet soft-sounding chuckle, Cooper has been able to work within the structure of the burger giant to grow a franchise business that now boasts 47 McDonald's restaurants in Birmingham, Anniston and Gadsden, Ala. The number of restaurants makes him one of the largest franchisees of McDonald's, which says its average franchisee owns three restaurants.

The son of a Chicago baker, Cooper started his career in public relations and was always ready to jump on a new idea. His projects included videotaping winter baseball games in Cuba for broadcast in the United States just as Fidel Castro was rising to power and work as a gag writer for various Windy City comedians. A public-relations firm he formed with Ben Burns and Al Golin became McDonald's first public-relations agency before it could afford to tout itself through major advertising.

Max Cooper, who operates one of the largest McDonald's franchises, is credited with helping popularize the "Two all-beef patties" jingle.

Over the years Cooper championed such marketing ideas as co-sponsoring the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City. After he became a franchisee, he helped popularize the jingle "Two all beef patties special sauce lettuce cheese pickles onions on a sesame seed bun" and was later a major force behind the chain's value marketing strategy.

Just last winter, to bring a little excitement to central Alabama, Cooper paid $4,000 to have two truckloads of snow brought in from Sault Sainte Marie, Mich., and Effingham, Ill. He got the idea for the caper when he saw a news item on television, saying those snow-swamped towns wanted to give their snow away. The stunt garnered widespread — and free — media coverage and drew snow-hungry Alabama kids to Cooper's restaurants.

Although past retirement age, Cooper, who likes to leave his exact age a mystery, still keeps a close watch on his restaurants and is working to expand the company, CLP Corp. of Birmingham, even more. He is so involved in his restaurants, in fact, that he can scarcely enter a unit without sprinting to the french fry station to help out.

Cooper took time out from his business recently to discuss his nearly four decades with the largest burger chain in the world. He ate a plain hamburger and insisted his lunch companion try a new McDonald's chicken sandwich. Later, he said, he would prepare a gourmet pasta dinner, as cooking fine food is as much a passion for him as selling Big Macs and french fries.

Cooper found he had a talent for publicity as an enlistee in the U.S. Army. As a young man, he became a publicity agent after stints as a bakery owner, a carpet salesman and a human prop on a television show that was directed by a friend and featured a piano player. "I would hold a glass, and my elbow would be on the piano. I got $7.50," Cooper recounted.

He started working for a local restaurateur, Irv "all you can eat" Benjamin, who paid him $50 for placing items in Irv Kupcinet's gossip column in the Chicago Sun-Times. "In the first week I had him in three times," said Cooper, with a note of pride in his voice and an obvious relish for telling stories. "This became too expensive. He became my very first client for $200 a month. I was now in the publicity business."

Then came the McDonald's account in 1957, with an initial billing of $500 spent on working to get free publicity that would associate the chain's name with hamburgers in the public consciousness.

"We were getting publicity stories on their growth," Cooper said. "We used to create statistics on the hamburgers they sold.

"He's a quintessential nudge; he's always been a maverick," said Cooper's former partner, Golin, who stayed in the public-relations business and is now chairman of Golin/Harris Communications in Chicago and is still an adviser to McDonald's. "He's been that way since he was a young fellow in our business. He had a great feel for what the public wanted."

By the early 1960s Cooper was working closely with Harry Sonneborn, the man "who looked after the numbers" and later became company president, while Ray

(See MCDONALD'S, page 22)

Early in his career Max Cooper, left, filmed baseball games in Cuba for broadcast in the United States. Here he poses with Fidel Castro.

Accommodation by the Book — An Excerpt

There's a simple formula for guest accommodation

It's The Accommodation Program Seating Formula which helps you designate seating that will accommodate non-smokers and smokers alike. And it's just one of the many suggestions for accommodation you'll find in The Accommodation Program restaurant Source Book. Receive it FREE along with a catalog for other FREE materials when you participate in The Accommodation Program. Look for the reply card in this publication or call 1-800-929-1414.

The Accommodation Program®
Courtesy of Philip Morris Incorporated

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/fthp0003

2061036944